Cooperative Extension Service • Michigan State University
Extension Bulletin E-2409 • June 1992

Promoting Fee-fishing Operations as Tourist Attractions

Charles J. Chopak
Department of Fisheries and Wildlife

K-049708

Aquaculture, the controlled cultivation of aquatic animals and plants, is a small industry in Michigan. Commercial trout farming began in Michigan around 60 years ago. Because of increased national fish consumption, aquaculture offers Michigan farmers an opportunity for enterprise diversification. In particular, fee-fishing has agriculture and tourism linkages that make it a unique aquaculture enterprise.

Fee-fishing has many positive aspects. First, fee-fishing offers family entertainment that is both fun and educational. Second, the food fish products are healthy, nutritious and safe. Third, no fishing license is required because the fishing is in private ponds. Finally, because fish are in densely stocked ponds, fee-fishing gives younger anglers a chance to learn how to catch fish successfully.

This report is intended to provide Michigan operators of fee-fishing enterprises with useful information about how to market their operations as tourist attractions or how fee-fishing could add to the tourism potential of other similar tourist activities (e.g., pick-your-own operations).

The majority of the data used to prepare this report were collected in a survey of Michigan fish growers. Fee-fishing operators who responded to an earlier producer questionnaire were interviewed.

APPLIED LIFE STUDIES LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

What is fee-fishing?

The first step to improved marketing of a fee-fishing enterprise is to understand the term "fee-fishing". Fee-fishing is more than just inviting anglers to come to fish in your densely stocked ponds. A better, more complete concept of a fee-fishing operation takes into account that the visitors, or guests, view fee-fishing in the larger context of a tourism experience, with fishing in densely stocked ponds as only one component.

There are two important reasons to view fee-fishing as part of a larger tourism experience. First, this approach treats customers as guests and therefore implies that they have other needs beyond fishing. Second, this perspective places the fishing within a larger context of why people visit a fee-fishing operation: they are looking for a family activity that is both fun and educational.

Fee-fishing in Michigan

Slightly less than 40 percent of all fish growers who were interviewed have fee-fishing operations. The most common species available is rainbow trout, though some growers also stock brook trout, brown trout, catfish, bluegills and largemouth bass.

Because there are few fee-fishing operations in Michigan, and because fee-fishing is a tourism activity, its competition comes pri-

marily from other recreational attractions and activities. Though some fish farms specialize in fee-fishing, most growers also have game fish or food fish operations. Not all operations produce their own fish—many purchase adult fish from other growers to stock in their ponds.

Growers vary in the services that they offer to customers. Most of the growers surveyed in 1991 reported they will clean, bag and ice the caught fish at no cost, while fewer than half are willing to fillet fish. Few growers offer additional services, though some innovative growers offer hatchery tours, refreshments, paddleboats and fish feeding demonstrations. They may also sell fish feed, sell fish or have a gift shop.

More than half of the growers with fee-fishing operations advertise. Growers who advertise do so in a variety of ways, including local newspapers, brochures and newsletters. Reasons reported by growers for not advertising are that they have enough customers without advertising, their facility is for members only, or there are restrictions on putting up signs where they are located.

Three sets of prices are possible in a fee-fishing operation: entrance fees, cost of caught fish and fees for other services (e.g., filleting,)[1]. Most growers do not charge an entrance fee, citing that they do not want to scare off potential customers. The growers who do charge an entrance fee do so in one of four ways: a flat rate per carload or per person; a flat rate per person with no charge for fish caught; a system based on the age of the angler; or admission for members only. The prices for fish caught vary both by species and unit of pricing (either by the inch or the pound).

Fee-fishing operations are open from February through October, but the peak period of sales occurs during July and August. Most growers set their prices at the beginning of the season and do not adjust them until the next season.

Almost 70 percent of people contacted in a consumer survey stated that they were aware of fee-fishing operations in Michigan. But only 5 percent of those consumers who stated they were aware of these operations reported that they had actually gone fee-fishing.

Promoting a fee-fishing operation

To better market your fee-fishing operation, you should promote your operation and its products as part of an overall tourist experience. This means engaging in both on-farm and off-farm promotions to keep old customers and attract new ones. In tourism, word-of-mouth is the most effective means of advertisement.

On-farm promotions

On-farm promotions are designed to encourage repeat visits from customers and to stimulate new business through word-of-mouth. To attract and keep customers (guests) for your fee-fishing operation, you need to provide:

1. A scenic, aesthetically beautiful setting. Because your guests are on vacation, they prefer to have a picturesque, relaxing environment when they fish. This includes shade trees, grass, well maintained grounds, benches, tables and flowers.

2. A good quality product. Growers should make available to visitors a diversified line of products (species and sizes) that look nice and are nutritious, healthy and safe.

3. A friendly and helpful staff. Staff training is critical to ensure that guests are well treated. Visitors are more likely to return to a place where the staff is friendly and cooperative.

4. An adequate number of workers. Even though your customers are on vacation (if only for the day), they do not enjoy waiting. To combat this, the operation needs a large enough staff to handle the volume of visitors.

[1]For more details on the pricing systems of fee-fishing operations, see Chopak (in press).

5. Clearly marked prices. This eliminates confusion and avoids problems that would detract from the visitors' experience. Also, this allows visitors to make better decisions about what services they want to use.

6. Adequate facilities. It is important to minimize congestion for services and facilities offered (restrooms, ponds and picnic facilities).

7. Other on-site activities. Activities other than fishing will enhance the visitors' tourism experience, including hatchery tours, fish feeding, a picnic area or lake activities (swimming and paddleboats). In deciding what activities to offer, keep in mind that all members of a travel party may not be interested in fishing but may play a role in deciding whether to visit your business.

8. Souvenirs and memories.[6] Have something for customers to take with them to encourage return visits and to encourage others to visit. Possibilities include a brochure about the fish farm, information on cleaning or preparing fish (a local recipe, if possible) and souvenirs (for example, sun visors, hats, T-shirts, coffee mugs, key chains or buttons).

9. Ensure product quality. It is important to ensure the quality of fish products. This can be done by: having healthy fish that bite well; carefully packaging the fish (ask about visitors' travel plans to suggest how to keep the fish fresh); and giving fish preparation and cooking suggestions. The fee-fishing's reputation is only as good as the on-farm experience and the quality of the fish (appearance, texture, freshness and taste) when it is prepared. Do whatever is possible to minimize quality reduction for travelers.

10. Information about other area activities. It is important to provide information (brochures or signs) about other area activities. A variety of activities in the area for tourists will help your business, not hurt it. In addition, this will build a feeling of community among operators of various recreational activities in the area.

Off-farm promotions

Off-farm promotions are designed to attract new customers to your operation. Growers with fee-fishing operations must direct their off-farm promotional efforts at both the local and regional levels. Each type of promotion should be directed toward different types of visitors and should use different methods.

Local promotions (15-mile radius) should be directed toward contact points where area travelers might request information about the area's activities, including hotel operators, the Chamber of Commerce, gas stations, the tourist information office, the county Extension office and anywhere else that tourists may ask for advice about recreational activities. To build awareness of your operation, you might offer a free fishing experience to selected people who might recommend your business to tourists. These contact points are important because tourists already in the area ask them, "What are the fun things to do around here?" A good working relationship with these people will result in an overall stronger business environment for both you and other operations in your area. Visitors want to have a variety of experiences, and your fee-fishing operation can complement other area activities. In addition, local media, including newspapers, brochures and flyers, should be used in peak tourist periods to directly influence the tourism decisions of visitors in your area. Finally, your operation should be listed in both the telephone directory and travel guides. These are low cost ways of helping tourists more easily find your facility.

Other off-farm promotions should be directed more at the regional level, including tourist associations, newspapers in larger

REMEMBER:
PEOPLE WANT TO HAVE FUN, LEARN AND EXPERIENCE NEW THINGS! HOW THEY REMEMBER THEIR EXPERIENCE AT YOUR FARM CAN BE YOUR BEST (OR WORST) FORM OF ADVERTISING!!

surrounding cities (for example, Detroit and Chicago) and bus tour companies. The goal of these promotions is to influence travelers when they are deciding where to spend their vacations. Owners of local tourism attractions can organize to jointly promote the diversity of activities in their area. Regional promotion generally is too costly for a grower to tackle independently, so cooperation among growers and other tourist service businesses is required to develop an adequate promotion budget to address more distant markets.

What else should you do?

In addition to on-farm and off-farm promotions of the fee-fishing operation and its products, you should also listen to and learn from your customers.

Learn about your guests.

Information about your guests is critical to promoting your business. For example, information on where they came from, how many people are in their group, the number of days they have spent in the area, how they learned about your operation and so on, is important to guide both your on-farm and off-farm promotions. Three ways you can acquire information about your guests are:

Guest registry. As visitors arrive, you could request that they write in your guest registry their names, where they came from, the number of people with them and so on. This is a non-obtrusive way of having people leave information necessary for your promotional activities. The addresses of visitors are useful because you can then send them a flyer reminding them of future events and activities at your site and in your area. Remember, your best future business prospects are your past customers, and satisfied customers are your best form of advertising.

Large wall map. Another popular way of acquiring information about your visitors is to have a family member put a pin in a wall map to show where they are from. This is also fun and shows your guests the diversity of visitors that your operation attracts.

Observation and informal discussion. The operator, or the staff member who greets the guests, could observe and informally question the guests to acquire the information you need to conduct your promotional activities. This is the least threatening method to get this information because it does not require guests to decide whether they want to write down certain information.

Solicit advice from your guests.

It is also important to demonstrate that you are willing to improve the quality of the goods and services that you offer. This will generate good will only if you listen carefully and follow through with reasonable suggestions. It is important to remember that you are providing a service, and that if your present guests are not satisfied, your future guests won't be, either. There are three ways to solicit advice from your guests:

Verbally. Ask guests for any comments or suggestions they have about their visit to your farm, and record them later. It is important to remain positive and not be defensive as people give their comments. Remember, you asked them for suggestions! This method is good because you are likely to get more responses and more detail per response. On the other hand, not all questions that you want answered will get asked, and people are less likely to make negative comments orally.

Suggestion box. You could also have a small form (a note card or 1/2 page photocopy) for interested guests to complete. The card could either be blank or have some questions about what they liked and didn't like, and what additional goods and services they would like to have available. This method is useful because all questions you want answers to would be asked, and you will have a better chance of soliciting constructive (both positive and negative) comments from guests. Not everybody is willing to write down their

comments, so you will get fewer responses and less detail per response, and you will not be able to ask questions to clarify their comments.

Both. Guests could be asked orally for any comments or suggestions they have, and invited to make use of the suggestion box.

Summary

Only a small percentage of Michigan consumers stated that they have ever gone fee-fishing, even though they are aware of Michigan fee-fishing operations. Therefore, more effort needs to be made to promote these operations, both on-farm and off-farm. The critical issue, though, is to recognize that fee-fishing is both an agricultural and a tourism activity. Promotional efforts have to include both the product and service sides of the fee-fishing operation. Few travelers go fee-fishing only to catch fish and leave. Most travelers want to have fun and learn something new. The challenge is to offer your guests a complete tourism experience that includes not only fishing, but also a variety of other activities and experiences. Capturing a tourist requires that he or she must first be attracted to Michigan, then to your region of Michigan and finally to your business. Thus, you should be willing to become involved in the full chain of tourism industry promotional activities.

3 0112 106071191

Sources of Information

Extension bulletins

To obtain any of these bulletins, contact your county Extension office or the Michigan Cooperative Extension Service Bulletin Office (10B Agriculture Hall, Michigan State University, E. Lansing, MI 48824).

Fisheries

E-1179	Great Lakes Fish Preparation
E-1180	Freshwater Fish Preservation
E-1323	Commercial Freezing of Freshwater fish
E-1775	Making Plans for Commercial Fish Culture
E-1776	My Bluegills are Stunted, Help!
E-2028	Eating Great Lakes Fish
E-2016	Testing Contaminants—A Guide for Home and Farm
E-2410	What Consumers Want: Advice for Food Fish Growers
E-2411	What Brokers, Wholesalers, Retailers and Restaurants Want: Advice for Food Fish Growers

Tourism

E-1937	Tourism and its Significance in Local Development
E-2004	Tourism Planning
E-1958	Developing a Tourism Organization
E-1959	Tourism Marketing
E-1992	Feasibility Analysis in Tourism
E-1939	Developing a Promotional Strategy
E-1957	Creating a Promotional Theme
E-1940	Information and Traveller Decision Making
E-1938	Managing Tourism Information Systems
E-2005	Selecting Promotional Media
E-1999	Pricing Tourism Products and Services
E-1960	Direct Marketing of Agricultural Products to Tourists

Other related readings

Chopak, C.J. (In press.) Marketing Michigan Aquacultural Products. Research report 526. East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Agricultural Experiment Station.

Chopak, C.J., and J.R. Newman. (In press.) The Status and Potential of Michigan Aquaculture. Special Report No. C1. East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Agricultural Experiment Station.

Spotts, D.M. (Editor.) 1991. Travel and Tourism in Michigan: A Statistical Profile. Research Monograph No. 2. East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Travel, Tourism and Recreation Resource Center.

This work is a result of research sponsored by the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station and the Michigan Department of Agriculture under the State Subject Matter Project #3804.

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

MSU is an affirmative-action equal-opportunity institution. Cooperative Extension Service programs and materials are available to all without regard to race, color, national origin, sex, handicap, age or religion.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work in agriculture and home economics, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Gail L. Imig, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Michigan State University, E. Lansing, MI 48824.

This information is for educational purposes only. References to commercial products or trade names does not imply endorsement by the Cooperative Extension Service or bias against those not mentioned. This bulletin becomes public property upon publication and may be printed verbatim with credit to MSU. Reprinting cannot be used to endorse or advertise a commercial product or company.

New-7:92-1M-LJ--MW-CP-75¢ (Aquaculture)
Filing Key: 23.521

Produced by Outreach Communications
Printed on recycled paper with vegetable based inks